

PAUL'S APPEAL TO PHILEMON

Philemon 1-25

By Leo Douma

Philemon is a letter by the Apostle Paul that we rarely look at. In fact when I decided to look at something different, and short, and thought Philemon might be interesting, I noticed I had almost no references to it in my library. So I started off with a Google search & then went to the Morling theological college library. This letter is so different to the others of Paul. Usually we think of Paul's long letter to Romans or the Corinthians, full of theology and biblical teaching. Now what we have here is a short personal letter. It has no direct teaching. It's a very personal note to a Christian friend, Philemon. Yet it is so revealing of Paul's personal character and it is very rich in giving an example of how to deal with a very difficult issue, how to tactfully approach another when there could be lots of tension. I am reminded of the Proverb (12:18): *"There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword. But the tongue of the wise brings healing."* Some people, just by the manner they express themselves, can leave us reeling, while others, with wisdom and tact can actually help bring people together and reconciled. Now, what I am getting at, what we see in Paul's letter is not about technique, but about a genuine, humble, Christ-centred approach to dealing with one another. The background to this letter is that Philemon is a rich well-to-do Christian living in Colossi, who, as was common in those days, had slaves that he owned. One of them, Onesimus, ran off, presumably having stolen stuff from his master. Onesimus had fled to Rome, twelve hundred miles away, to lose himself and be free in that large city. But as God's providence would have it, he came across Paul who was in prison, under house arrest, and was eventually converted by Paul. Onesimus had become a good Christian man, who was a wonderful help for Paul. But Paul feels it is not right that he now has helping him, the slave of a good mate, Philemon. So he feels it is important for Onesimus to go back to Colossi, to his master and be reconciled. Paul is hoping that Philemon will forgive him, and let him back to assist Paul. Now this is a difficult situation. It was a crime for a slave to run away, even worse if he has stolen from his master. The usual punishment was a severe beating, even death. Slaves were regarded in those days as the property of the master. They had no rights. They were seen as the 'living dead'. That is, they were still alive, but dead in terms of freedom, rights, etc. When a slave ran away, it was usually a mark against the master because it implied

either that the master was too weak to properly control his slaves, or he was too harsh, beating them so often that they would rather face possible death by being caught escaping. A slave running off could also have broader ramifications for the local folk, especially if the slave was the steward of the house, the accountant who managed all the master's affairs. So Philemon was within his legal rights to deal very strongly with Onesimus. Paul in this letter is appealing to Philemon to receive his slave back, forgive him, be reconciled with him, and let him go back to Paul to help him. Let's go through this letter and see how Paul does it.

Paul very carefully builds a platform from which to launch his appeal. It starts in verse 1 as he introduces himself as the writer of the letter: "*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...*" Already here, Paul is setting the stage. He usually starts his letters: "*Paul an Apostle...*" (Like Galatians, Ephesians etc)- by that he gives his credentials, his authority, his right to command- 'I am an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ'. But in this letter there will be no commanding. There is no need to. He simply says who he is, Paul, and then demonstrates how humble his own circumstances are: he himself is not a free man, he is a prisoner, at the whim of a master. But note he is not saying he is a prisoner of the Emperor in Rome, as he was, but "*a prisoner of Christ Jesus.*" Paul submits himself to the Lordship of Jesus, and whatever Jesus wants from him, that is what he humbly lives with. Paul also brings the greetings of Timothy, who Philemon also knew. They are together brothers in Christ. In verse 2 we see Paul writes "*To Philemon our dear brother and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, and Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home.*" The letter is a personal letter to Philemon, not to the church, but Paul gives his greetings to the family and the church. Apphia is Philemon's wife, and Archippus his son, who was himself a leader or pastor in the church at Colossi (Colossians 4:17). We can see that Philemon is a wealthy and very generous man. The church meets in his house. When we think of churches in the New Testament we should think of house churches- not as we know them now. So this is a very good mature Christian family. Now Paul let's Philemon know that he prays for Philemon a lot. (verse 4ff) "*I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.*" Paul shows us here that he is a man of prayer. So many of his letters have this opening- that he thanks God for the people he is praying for. What a wonderful gift to give each other that we pray for each other, regularly. And not just asking God to

help us with our issues, but with God, thinking of the good things about each other, giving thanks to God for each other, for the person's we are, the gifts we have, the faith we share in common. What a powerful attitude change it makes, how humbling, how enriching, that we think of others, see the faith and love for others and praise God. It's hard to be negative towards someone you are praising God for! Paul says he prays for Philemon that he might keep growing in the faith, mature in the faith, that he might come to see more and more all the good we have in Christ. A Christian matures in the faith, can be active in the faith, by focusing on Jesus. Paul in giving this general point about growing in understanding is providing a preparation for what he will ask of Philemon. If Philemon is to be mature about how he responds to Onesimus then he needs to focus on Jesus, he needs to focus on all that he is and has in Jesus, on what Christ wants. Because if he focuses on Onesimus then he will just see a run away slave, he will see the 'useless bloke' who has taken off with his stuff. In verse 7 Paul compliments Philemon: *"Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints."* To be spiritually refreshed means you have spent time with another person, who by their actions of care, their words of comfort, have shown you some thing of the wonder of God in Jesus. There was some thing about Philemon that enabled him to refresh others in their faith. And Paul is not hesitant to say so and compliment him, to express the joy and encouragement he gets from it. Now, this compliment helps Paul to set Philemon in the right frame of mind when he gets to his appeal about Onesimus. But this is not just a manipulation, giving a compliment because he wants some thing. It is tragic that, even in churches, there are so few good encouraging words given. And if a compliment does come our way, we are wary, wondering what's coming next, what are we being set up for. Yes, Paul is very careful in how he sets the stage to place his appeal. But none of it is empty flattery or manipulation. He is honest and humble.

In verse 8-10 Paul now starts to get to the matter at hand: *"Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought, yet I appeal on the basis of love. I then, as Paul- an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus- I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains."* Paul as an apostle was in a position of authority. He could tell Philemon what to do. But to do so would undercut all he has just said about Philemon. To command him would be to imply he is immature, incapable of making a good decision. It would take away the compliment, that Philemon was one who 'refreshed the hearts of others'. If we want to grow in the

faith, if we want others to grow up spiritually, then we need to be responsible for our own decision making. We can tell people to be in church, we can tell our kids to do this or that, and they may do so, outwardly, but if it doesn't come from the heart, it isn't a decision, a commitment they have made to the Lord. No, Paul doesn't command, he appeals to Philemon, on the basis of love. Paul humbles himself showing himself to be an old man and a prisoner. It is at this point, that Paul now finally says why he wrote this letter "*I appeal to you for my son Onesimus*". There is no blunt flopping it out. There is no demanding. He has very carefully given a context in which to place this appeal.

Now he goes on explaining why Philemon should be gentle with Onesimus. Paul has become very fond and dependent on Onesimus. He calls him his son. That is how Paul speaks in other places, like with Timothy. Those converted through Paul, those who assist him in the work, he regards as his spiritual sons. Paul disciplined these young men, he had them as apprentices letting them watch his life and teaching, so they would learn how to share the gospel. Paul admits Onesimus was not always the best slave for Philemon Verse 11 "*Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me*". There is a play on words here - Onesimus means useful. Paul is making it clear to Philemon that Onesimus has changed, changed radically. He is now a fine Christian man. Note how Paul says in verse 12 "*I am sending him- who is my very heart-back to you.*" Paul is humbly admitting his feelings for the slave, how it would affect him if Philemon were to take the actions that he was legally entitled to, to beat Onesimus. Paul doesn't command or demand or manipulate, but appeals by sharing his deep feelings, what impact it would have on him. Paul is appealing -do this for me. Paul admits in verse 13 that he would like to keep Onesimus with him to assist in the work, but he humbly gives it over to Philemon, verse 14 "*But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do will be spontaneous and not forced.*" Paul gives over to Philemon the power, the decision. Paul puts his trust in his friend, his brother in Christ. Too many young people do not really mature because they are not given trust. Too often preachers are keep telling and demanding of their parishioners, implying they don't trust them to make good decisions, led by the Spirit through prayer and the Word.

Paul puts forward a suggestion to Philemon in verse 15 for him to consider "*Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good- no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.*" Paul is at no

stage saying that he sees no fault in what Onesimus did. But wonders whether God in his grace and providence has turned what was bad for Philemon into some thing very good. He is also saying to Philemon that he can no longer regard Onesimus just as property, a slave, a non person, but one who is now a brother in Christ. It is now that Paul puts in the final point, spelling out what it is he is asking of Philemon; verse 17: *“So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”* In other words, please forgive him, love him as you would me, a brother in Christ, as you would love Christ. Now Paul is not expecting Philemon to shoulder whatever the cost was of what Onesimus stole. It can be so easy just to say to another forgive, when they face financial implications or other implications. Note what Paul says in verse 18&19 *“If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back- not to mention that you owe me your very self.”* Paul writes an IOU- he personally signs it. The language in the Greek is standard financial language *“Charge it to my account”*. Paul doesn’t just leave the financial implications with Philemon. He puts his money where his mouth is. He also leaves a gentle reminder- I may owe you now Philemon- but don’t forget you owe me- I am your spiritual father. I am willing to put my action where my mouth is, can you please do the same.

Paul, in trust, leaves the matter with Philemon (verse 20&21) *“I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.”* Such is Paul’s confidence that the one who delivered the letter from Rome was Onesimus, who travelled with Tychicus to Colossi who had the letter for the church there (Cf Colossians 4:7-9). Next week DV I will pick up the issue of Paul’s attitude to the evil of slavery- it seems he goes along with it- or does he?. What I find so striking in this letter is the way Paul presents his appeal. He doesn’t bluster and demand, he doesn’t emotionally manipulate (if you think he does it’s because we are so used to it and read it back in to the text). I see a blend of sincerity, humility, wisdom, tact, very carefully thinking through how to set up his appeal and approach. He is willing to express humbly his needs, the emotional effects on himself, and lay them before Philemon. He has a positive view of Philemon because he is always praying for him and thanking God for the good Philemon does. Paul is willing to trust him, to trust that Christ is at work in Philemon, is mature as a Christian, who is also willing to be humble and listen to the appeal and do right. It is my prayer that I can be like Paul in my work, in my

relationships. It is my prayer that each of us would be as humble, gracious, tactful and trusting in our homes, in our marriages, in our church relations, in our community life.